

The Implications of the Second Trump Administration's Immigration and Education Policies for International Student Mobility

Ashrie Wahid

Bachelor of International Relations, Department of International Relations, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Hasanuddin University, Makassar, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

The United States has experienced profound political and socio-economic transformation since the non-consecutive election and inauguration of Donald Trump as its 47th President in 2025. Principal among these are sweeping alterations made to the overall immigration policy that have otherwise shaped entire diaspora communities whose members have sought higher education in the country. Measures such as restrictive immigration orders targeting specific countries, heightened visa scrutiny, federal pressure on higher education institutions, and even the detainment of foreign students have not only shaped the flow of migration into the United States but also resulted in a massive upheaval in the numbers of foreign scholars and in the procedures for assessing them. This essay analyses how said measures have affected student visa pathways within the broader geopolitical competition for international talent and student mobility, and how this has impacted the U.S.' soft-power advantage in higher education.

KEYWORDS

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Introduction

Since January 2025, the United States (U.S.) has been undergoing a period of significant political and socioeconomic transformation, triggered by Donald Trump's successful 2024 reelection campaign and his subsequent inauguration as the 47th President of the United States. The Second Trump Administration has been defined, among other things, by a more extreme approach toward the U.S. immigration policy, which, as of October 2025, has resulted in the deportation of over 520,000 civilians who supposedly entered the country through illegal means, in addition to travel restrictions imposed on certain countries deemed less than ideal (Department of Homeland Security, 2025). This shift, mirroring anti-immigrant rhetoric displayed by Trump during his presidential campaigns and his first term as President between 2017 and 2021, has led to a significant upheaval of domestic and foreign perceptions toward the U.S. as a migrant country, not least of which among foreign

*CORRESPONDENCE Ashrie Wahid | wahida22e@student.unhas.ac.id | Bachelor of International Relations, Department of International Relations, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Hasanuddin University, Indonesia

diaspora and expatriate communities that currently reside in various parts of the country. Particular attention has been given to its immediate effects on higher education, in which direct correlations between the deportation of supposedly illegal immigrants and the treatment of international students have been made. This is evident in the revocation of over 6,000 student visas, primarily due to charges of law violations or unauthorised overstay, which are also part of a perceived “crackdown” against universities and have led to the deportation of international students (Faguy, 2025).

In conjunction with a more hostile immigration policy, the second Trump Administration has also been focused on an agenda of major austerity reforms, as it has made clear through the establishment of the Department of Government Efficiency, colloquially abbreviated as DOGE, aimed at reducing excessive government expenditures. These efforts have resulted in the disbandment of major U.S. institutions directly related to its soft power distribution, such as USAID and the possibility of the dissolution of the Department of Education; the former of which has led to a further suspension or dissolution of initiatives and programs aimed at promoting education in the U.S. and providing scholarships or financial aid for foreign students currently studying in the country through national-based programs and student exchange programs such as the Young Southeast Asian Leadership Initiative (YSEALI) and the Fulbright Program (Padone, 2025; Patton & Forster, 2025). While not entirely related to immigration, such austerity measures have both eliminated opportunities for many international students aspiring to study in the U.S. and cut off funding for international students currently enrolled in U.S. universities, and have been a preeminent factor in a 17% reduction of international student enrollment according to a survey by the Institute of International Education (Faguy, 2025).

These developments have evidently contributed to a mounting sense of uncertainty among foreign nationals currently residing in the U.S., especially those whose visas are issued on grounds of education or research. The detainment and subsequent efforts to deport international students by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) have rendered international students in the U.S. virtually vulnerable to unilateral actions against their presence, further exacerbated by the gradual elimination of assistance from the federal government, which has forced them to seek alternative funding mechanisms to continue their studies. Additionally, universities have found themselves increasingly implicated in a seemingly active campaign by the Trump administration against universities deemed “elite and liberal,” resulting in the revocation of grants and other administrative penalties to compel stricter compliance with underlying political agendas. This has made universities increasingly subject to rigorous procedures that have led to the removal of international students, though they have also been credited for assisting students with visa issues as federal government restrictions continue to mount.

A major concern has been the contraction of federal support for international education, which relates to the U.S.’ soft power advantage in higher education. The reduction of international students have resulted in implications that could affect the U.S.’ overall reputation as a premier destination for education or talent, the extent of which could determine how it engages with other states as it shifts from pursuing long-term cultural diplomacy to a more domestic, more isolationist approach that has become a key feature in Donald Trump’s overall rhetoric and political beliefs as President of the U.S. This shift may

well lead to an inward-oriented country that could compel major efforts by other powers, particularly those in Europe and Asia, to expand their own scholarships and overall soft power that could compete with the U.S., which could potentially put the latter's reputation as a superpower in jeopardy (Nietzel, 2025).

Considering these developments, this essay aims to examine how the Second Trump Administration's immigration and scholarship policies have affected both student visa pathways within the broader geopolitical context, especially as other powers compete to expand initiatives aimed at providing international students opportunities to study abroad, and how this has impacted the U.S.' soft power advantage in higher education. This will help fill a significant existing literature gap surrounding the Trump administration's approach toward international students within the context of its ongoing MAGA rhetoric, which has remained largely undiscussed as of the time of writing. This article will therefore attempt to answer three key questions, which are as follows:

1. How has the Trump Administration's renewed approach toward immigration and scholarships affected the experiences and continuity of international students in the U.S.?
2. To what extent have recent immigration and education policies eroded the U.S.' soft power advantage in terms of higher education?
3. How could its implications toward geopolitical dynamics globally, including Indonesia, compel a response among competing powers?

Analytical Framework

Migration Governance

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines migration governance as "the combined frameworks of legal norms, laws and regulations, policies and traditions as well as organisational structures and the relevant processes that shape and regulate approaches to migration in all its forms" (International Organization for Migration, n.d.). As it is the purview of the state to regulate how it maintains the flow of immigration in and out of said state, as well as considering an evolving school of thought that classifies immigrants as agents of change whose impact, if negative, may result in a process of securitization that vilifies migrants or puts them in a position that could harm a state's sovereignty, this definition of migration governance implies that such a convoluted system of regulations and mechanisms directly stems from a history of shifting rhetoric and public assessment of migrants in general. It can therefore be implied that migration governance is not just an administrative or legal function, but also a dynamic that is shaped by a history of shifting sociopolitical conditions and state interests, which can reflect how states perceive immigrants and the implications of receiving them.

This essay will make the case for how the migration regime that the U.S. has implemented under the second Trump administration, which has been shaped through nationalistic and protectionist ideals, has affected the manner in which international students are being treated concerning their migration status and, consequently, how it has resulted in a significant upheaval in the U.S.' exertion of soft power in the global scale, particularly toward international student mobility.

Internationalisation of Higher Education

The concept of higher education internationalisation, as defined by Knight, is the overall integration of intercultural perspectives into a university's mission of offering education, research, and extension. This concept, evidently a product of educational globalisation, has often been attributed to initiatives aimed at extending a university's reach to foreigners seeking to study abroad, such as scholarships or student exchanges, that also strive to incorporate multicultural approaches to ensure an inclusive experience for its participants. It therefore has far-reaching implications not just on the enhancement of an educational institution's quality and the elimination of knowledge gaps, but also in the political and economic spheres, in a way that enhances both a state's image and concurrently its ability to exert influence through that established image (Lamdaghri, Belaid & Korflesch, 2024). Through this concept, we can examine how the internationalisation of higher education is interlinked with the concept of soft power, where countries such as the U.S. strive to expand educational outreach to other countries, especially those categorised within the "developing world," usually as a means to promote their own values or ideals within a sociocultural dimension.

As previously and consistently mentioned throughout the beginning of this essay, a core concern regarding increasingly hostile approaches by the second Trump administration on immigration policy is the extent of their impact on international students, both seeking to study in the U.S. or currently enrolled in an American university, and in turn, the eventual degradation of the country's supposedly unparalleled soft power in influencing other countries through the sphere of higher education. Within the context of the internationalization of higher education, this essay will explain how both austerity reforms and hostile policies against "elite" universities in the U.S. have resulted in a reduced desirability in the country's image as a global forerunner of higher education, how that has been linked to a very evident decline in the enrollment of international students in American higher education institutions, how this will be especially detrimental to U.S. soft power, and how it has resulted in a gradual elevation of other countries offering student mobility opportunities as well as its role in shaping an increasingly multipolar global dynamic that puts the United States' reputation at odds with the current world order.

Research Method

This research is built upon a qualitative methodological approach, which Sugiyono (2019) explains is used to understand the fundamentals of a particular phenomenon in a detailed and thorough way through the collection of data that is not numerically measured, which is then analysed descriptively. In other words, it can be simplified as a method that aims to assess certain qualities or features of a social phenomenon that cannot be described using quantitative measures, and, as such, centres on the use of words in collecting and analysing available data.

Using the current context, this research enables the author to analyse and describe what is understood about the current situation surrounding the second Trump administration's immigration and education policies, specifically on limitations toward liberal-leaning universities and acceptance of international students, and how it has impacted the country's standing in the internationalisation of its higher education sector. This will then involve the

collection and analysis of data through literature reviews of primary and secondary sources accessible online, including news articles, journal articles, government reports and posts, as well as other publications on the policies and their implications, both in the short and long terms. This will then be synthesised using the narrative analysis approach, which will verify the data against existing facts and ensure consistency with the given context, and simplify the data into a single narrative text.

Results and Discussions

Decline in International Student Enrollment in the United States: Causes and Its Implications for Universities

International students comprise 6 per cent of all cases of university enrollments in the U.S., contributing at least \$55 billion to the economy (Faguy, 2025). This amount already includes student expenses incurred by student visa requirements, tuition fees, living expenses, health insurance, and other accommodations, among others. However, as previously mentioned, the rate of international student enrollments in the country has declined steeply since the beginning of the year; from 828 higher education institutions whose populations were surveyed by the Institute of International Examination in November 2025, as well as the Global Enrolment Benchmark Survey between August and October 2025, there has been a decrease of around 17 percent compared to previous years according to the former, while the latter cites two levels of higher education: 6 percent in undergraduate enrollments, and 19 percent on graduate enrollments, which has largely been attributed by stricter criteria and regulations regarding applications for student visas, as well as recurring issues such as delays and denials for students about to go to the country for the first time (Faguy, 2025; Nietzel, 2025). Through the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), it can also be seen that student arrivals are declining by region, with students from Africa falling by 33 percent, from the Middle East by around 17 percent, and from Asia by 24 percent; the latter also accounts for the 44 percent decline from India, which happened to be the U.S.' largest source of foreign students in the country (UNC Media Hub, 2025).

This number is also reflected in the international rankings of the country's well-known universities. As a primary example, Harvard University currently – as of November 2025 – has an international population of 10,158 students and scholars, compared to 9,970 in November 2024 and 8,087 in November 2023 (Harvard International Office, 2025; 2024; 2023). While this statistic seems to grow with every passing year, the percentage of its growth increment actually declined by about 90%, showing that the number of enrollments had taken a rather significant downturn in just the period between 2024 and 2025 alone, which also happened in the midst of the current administration's revocation of Harvard's Student and Visitor Program (SEVP) eligibility. This is further coupled by statements from other higher education institutions around the country, where institutions such as the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill had six of its students terminated from their SEVIS records by the federal government in April, and numbers in enrollments saw a decline in Texan public universities while Columbia University indicated a visible drop in foreign student applications during its registration period in early November (UNC Media Hub, 2025; Halberstam, 2025). While the latter has not given an official estimate on the number

of applications it has received over the past few months, it nevertheless fits in with the overall situation that now engulfs both the higher education sector and international students in the United States: that prestigious institutions are not insulated from a broader decline in international student mobility, and that it has far-reaching implications which now is in the process of forming an increasingly untenable environment for foreign studies.

To understand what this means for American universities and their eventual position in the global education stage, there is significant merit in examining how this downturn emerged in the first place. As previously defined, this predicament is the result of an extension of the second Trump administration's protectionist immigration policies to the educational sphere, with the suspension of visa interviews within specific time periods, as well as renewed social media vetting that scrutinises online activity exhibited by F, M, and J visa applicants (Stewart, 2025; Yousif, 2025). The U.S. also returned to the first Trump administration policy of suspending entry and visa issuance for citizens of 19 countries considered significant national security threats (U.S. Department of State, 2025). As such, this has resulted in very high refusal rates as visa applicants are now subjected to high scrutiny, with specific attention dedicated to those who were considered to be acting "against U.S. national interests"; more importantly, this refusal of visa applications also extends to outright revocation of student visas, especially in light of recent pro-Palestinian protests held by university students, some of which were foreign citizens. Consequently, such conditions have also resulted in revocations of visas in very high numbers due to political reasons, as has been the case for 300 visas stripped in connection to campus protests; this could be interlinked and might be a major factor in the decline in overall student and scholar population in the previously mentioned universities (Columbia and Harvard), as both had been sites of major pro-Palestinian protests in 2024 (Gedeon, 2025).

Most principally, while these new policies have primarily been aimed at reducing the number of international students coming into the country, they have also played a key role in furthering the administration's "crackdown" on the education system, which it has accused of being "radical" with progressive ideologies or, in other cases, even being "antisemitic," as has been the case for the role said universities have played in facilitating and/or supporting protests against Israel's continued war and genocide in Palestine (Smith-Schoenwalder, 2025). Given how significant a contribution international students make to such universities, the administration has not just curbed both the number of foreign students and federal funding to prestigious higher education institutions, but has also strived to reverse most established conceptions surrounding discrimination and, accordingly, campus policies and regulations aimed at protecting minorities and historically disadvantaged communities. This is also coupled with the fact that the administration has sought to dismantle the Department of Education, aiming to dissolve it both for austerity purposes and to enable "woke" policies that go against the majority partisan agenda (Smith-Schoenwalder, 2025).

What this has precipitated is a rollback of the independence of American higher education institutions in managing their finances and expanding their global outreach, as well as an extremely bleak financial disadvantage as the country loses one of its most significant economic contributors. The consequences are twofold. Financially, the severity of both the decline in applications and the withholding of federal grants and funding has

translated into significant losses, forcing various universities to resort to large spending cuts and other austerity measures (Kang, Dowdell & Coster, 2025). These cuts often manifest in reduced and downgraded academic programs, diminished research activity, and the reversal of international partnerships. In terms of outreach, while the flow of international students enrolling in the U.S. has not halted entirely, both the policies aimed at reducing their numbers and the decline that followed have significantly shaped their image and desirability, as foreigners continue to see it more as a high-risk choice than a welcoming destination. Even more so, as American universities suffer greatly from decreased interest and an unstable policy environment, the limitations of opportunities have led some foreign students to seek education elsewhere.

Impact on Overall Soft Power and Global Geopolitical Dynamics

The internationalisation of higher education has long served as one of the U.S.'s most effective instruments of soft power, with American universities functioning as both political tools in extending socioeconomic partnerships and cultural ambassadors in shaping generations of foreign leaders, scholars, and policymakers with academic expertise and positive perceptions of American society and values. However, the rollback of policies aimed at welcoming international students may render such an instrument useless in the country's eventual efforts to exert influence. This dynamic of hostile immigration regulations, through the suspension of visa applications or even revocations of current students' visas, as well as an ideological confrontation between the current administration and purportedly "elite and liberal" universities, has shown the full extent of the impact of growing securitization of both immigrants and the resulting international student mobility on relations between the U.S. and immigrant communities, and how they signal to the international community that both educational access in the country is now tied to partisan political objectives, and that foreign entry into the country, regardless for what purpose, will be subject to heavy scrutiny that is entirely based on political biases and preconceptions.

Another direct consequence of this can be seen in how this has escalated the competition of countries vying to become key educational hubs as an alternative to an increasingly isolated U.S. Concurrently with the decline of international students enrolling in U.S. universities, other institutions in Europe and Asia have seen an increase in their enrollment rates in two primary levels. At the undergraduate level, Asian countries saw an 8 per cent increase, while the UK saw a 3 per cent increase, and European institutions saw a 1 per cent increase. At the graduate level, Asian institutions saw a 3 per cent increase, while European institutions saw a 5 per cent increase, and those in the U.K. saw a 3 per cent increase (Nietzel, 2025). While the U.K. and other European countries saw consistent growth from 2024, Asian countries took a surprising lead in attracting international students, with China at the forefront of this breakthrough. While China's own educational internationalization boost predates the second Trump administration in its efforts, the shift that reduced the U.S.' own global intervention and educational expansion has been a major factor in the influx of international students into Chinese universities, especially in Africa, where the dissolution of USAID and its subsequent educational programs has left most African students or students-to-be searching for cheaper and easier alternatives; with at least 81,000 African students enrolled in Chinese universities in 2018 alone, China surpassed both the United

States in 2023 (with 55,000) and the United Kingdom in 2022 (with 68,000), quickly proven by a rebound after travel restrictions and campus closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that that number is expected to grow larger (Dahir, 2025).

These statistics increasingly show that the U.S. is in a very questionable position globally, at least from a higher education standpoint, which will leave it increasingly constrained in its capacity to exert its influence should it continue to implement travel restrictions and withhold visa issuances. Reduced U.S. presence will further encourage other countries, such as China, with its “global education diplomacy,” and the continued lack of focus on the Global South is likely to damage perception toward the U.S, which could be made worse in the long run without a proper educational platform to produce American-educated elites in foreign governments that have the potential to forge partnerships or improve weakening alliances with longstanding allies. Without a strong soft-power advantage that has long been justified by the U.S.’s once-welcoming internationalisation of higher education, it will no longer have a mostly dominant position and will likely be counterinfluenced by a global multipolar order.

Implications and Recommendations for Indonesian Foreign Policy Response

As recently as A.Y. 2024/2025, the number of Indonesian students enrolled in U.S. universities stood at 8,104, down from 8,348 in A.Y. 2023/2024 (Open Doors, 2025). There have been at least 15 instances of Indonesians having their visas revoked, detained by the ICE without due process, or outright deported by the current administration, with at least one student charged for a misdemeanour conviction in relation to the George Floyd protests, although the charge was dismissed (Shofa, 2025; Marcos, 2025). This suggests that Indonesians, particularly those studying in universities, are equally vulnerable to sudden visa terminations or summary arrests and subsequent deportations for political reasons, and while there is not yet a definitive proof of a link between these cases and the decrease of Indonesian students in the U.S. as previously mentioned, the measures could discourage a very large number of prospective applicants from Indonesia and compel them to reconsider the viability of the U.S. as a destination for long-term academic investment.

The Indonesian government must therefore approach this issue through three main strategies. First, it is within its strategic and moral interests to ensure the protection of its citizens in the face of legal issues, particularly when it concerns their immigration status and whether their rights are being preserved by the detaining authority. This can be done by strengthening consular assistance and representation mechanisms through its Embassy in Washington, D.C. and Consulate Generals in five cities (New York, Houston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco) to ensure further protection of Indonesian students in the U.S. while continuing to monitor cases of ICE detention involving Indonesians, and establishing legal support networks to ensure that procedural rights of affected students are fully respected by the authorities. Communication with the U.S. government, especially in clarifying the position of the detained, whilst also requesting transparency in enforcement and treatment toward the detained, is also a key measure to prevent further arbitrary treatment to uphold the welfare of legally troubled Indonesian students in the U.S.

Second, the Indonesian government must still maintain its relationship with the U.S., particularly in education and student mobility between the two countries through bilateral and intervarsity partnerships. Despite an increasingly combative approach against

immigrants and foreign students by the current U.S. administration, proactive engagement by one side to the other can reassure both academic institutions and prospective and currently enrolled Indonesian students that this country remains committed to fostering educational exchange. This can ensure that the flow of student mobility and scholarships between both countries remains “liquid” even as the U.S. continues its crackdown, and that venues for Indonesian students to study at universities or higher education institutions of their choice remain open through partnerships.

Lastly, in anticipation of a continuation of such belligerent policies that eventually render the political and social environment untenable for Indonesian students and other countries alike, the Indonesian government must therefore diversify its academic investment destinations in other, more viable countries by shifting strategic focus from the U.S. to foster partnerships and build relations with other, more stable alternative countries. This will ensure that Indonesian students are still offered high-quality international education even as the U.S. becomes less accessible, as well as reduce overdependence on a single destination.

Conclusion

2025 has been an especially contentious year for the U.S., with sweeping immigration policies that have resulted in the deportation of hundreds of thousands of civilians who were considered to have entered the country illegally. The decline of international student populations, especially Indonesian students, as well as the broader landscape of international student mobility in the U.S., have been disrupted by the securitisation of migration pathways and visa applications, the revocation of thousands of student visas, and the political targeting of “elite and liberal” universities. As such, when situated within the established conceptual frameworks of migration governance and the internationalization of higher education, the policies of the second Trump administration has created conditions that both fundamentally undermine the U.S.’ long-standing reputation as a global center for higher education and its penchant for its soft-power advantage, which has now been jeopardized by the geopolitical shift resulting from the increasing competition among other countries seeking to expand educational outreach in light of the gap that has now been increasingly made deep by the U.S.’s protectionist belligerence against the entry of international student mobility into the country.

For Indonesia, this evolving dynamic carries both risks and opportunities; while Indonesian students face heightened vulnerabilities posed by combative U.S. policies to curb immigration, Indonesia also stands to benefit from diversifying partnerships and proactively cultivating new international education pathways. It must therefore employ a delicate and balanced strategic approach that outlines its ultimate responsibility to ensure the protection of the rights of its citizens abroad, whilst at the same time maintaining both Indonesian-U.S. academic engagement opportunities and alternative avenues through partnerships with other emerging countries in the educational sphere. These measures form a coherent strategy that safeguards Indonesian interests during such a massive political and social transformation.

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